



Canadian Social Science
Vol. 12, No. 4, 2016, pp. 76-80
DOI:10.3968/8369

ISSN 1712-8056[Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Exploration on Cultivation of College Students' Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in College English Teaching

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Received 25 December 2015; accepted 14 March 2016
Published online 26 April 2016

Abstract

In traditional college English teaching, attention is focused on improvement of students' general English proficiency. Students usually receive knowledge and information passively from teachers without their own analysis and reflection. Worse still, students' cross-cultural communication competence has been neglected. Cultural information has been regarded as factual knowledge imparted to students which are obstructive to the formation of students' cross-cultural communication competence. In order to improve students' cross-cultural communication competence, it is proposed in this paper that teacher should pay attention to improve students' oral English proficiency so as to engage students in oral communication. Then college English teachers' teaching methodology should be changed, designing more tasks close to the real situation especially related to the cultural differences for students to explore and organize oral activities. In the process of English teaching, the formation of culture stereotypes and bias should be avoided, and students should be encouraged to read extensively to receive more true cultural information. Proper culture empathy is also feasible.

Key words: Cross-cultural communication; Competence; English language teaching

Tang, L. Y. (2016). Exploration on Cultivation of College Students' Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in College English Teaching. *Canadian Social Science*, 12(4), 76-80. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/8369>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8369>

INTRODUCTION

The present world is compared to be a global village, for communication and interaction among people of different countries in politics, economy, and culture and other fields is increasingly booming. English, a kind of international language, is considered as the carrier of culture for people to make effective communication. However, taking command of English and speaking grammatically and syntactically correct English cannot ensure success and smooth communication. Language is regarded as a tool to communicate but not a guarantee for successful communication, for people might subconsciously make use of their own native culture, communicative habit to reckon ideas of the target people, which may give rise to clashes and misunderstanding. People from different countries are influenced and inhibited by their own innate cultural behavioral model. If they do not understand the others' value orientation, way of thinking and social norm and tradition, they might fail in communication. Therefore, college students in 21st century are expected to be of cross-cultural communication competence besides English proficiency so as to be competitive in international market. Cross-cultural communication refers to communication among people from different countries, each of who is of their specific historical and cultural characteristics. Proper understanding and application of cultural knowledge of those target people can contribute a lot to effective communication. As for English teaching in China, much emphasis is paid to practice and improvement of students' test-taking ability rather than communicative competence, cultural education and exploration neglected, which sometimes results in cultural aphasia. Teachers should be fully conscious that English learning is more than taking command of grammatical rules and language knowledge of English. It means taking advantage of English as a carrier of culture to make intercultural interaction. Only when they have a

considerable recognition of cultural differences between the west and China can they receive and express ideas without too much misunderstanding. Thus, the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication competence is an essential part in English teaching which can enable students to become more competitive when they apply for a job in multi-national businesses or foreign trade corporations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Studies on Cross-Cultural Communication

Samovar, Porter and Stefani (2000, p.48) stated that "More precisely, cross-cultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event." Lustig and Koester (1993) put forward a more comprehensive definition "Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviors that should be used to create shared meanings". In general, cross-cultural communication is defined as the process in which people with different cultural background communication. It involves interdisciplinary. In English language teaching, language, culture and communication constitute a major part of it, which is also the main focus of research in cross-cultural communication. Language, a part of culture, is also carrier of culture, for language are the principal way utilized to express one's idea and make it comprehensible to the target members, while culture restricts the development of language form and dominates how language is used to express meaning. In the process of cross-cultural communication, the phenomena of culture shock often come into being due to the improper use of language, and the root cause of communication failure is the insufficient understanding of culture. Therefore, the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication should constitute a major part in language teaching. Language is the symbol of culture. Language teaching should be considered as a kind of communication, acculturation. Zhao and Jiang (2003, p.332) stated that in any language teaching, language should be regarded as tool of cross-cultural communication to be imparted; and only in cross-cultural communication can learners know how to speak that language appropriately and accurately. Cross-cultural communication education is the integration of language teaching and cultural teaching. Therefore, in college English teaching, students are expected to grasp cross-cultural communication knowledge, or they are going to make many pragmatic mistakes giving rise to communication failure.

1.2 Studies on Cross-Cultural Communication Competence

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) proposed an influential theory, three elements in cross-cultural communication competence. It includes motivation, knowledge and skill. Motivation refers to desire to communicate with others, and it gives rise to the outcome of cross-cultural communication. Motivation is mainly reflected in its affective association in the process of cross-cultural communication. People with positive and objective communicative intention are more likely to make accurate evaluation of others. They usually possess higher cross-cultural communication competence. Knowledge refers to the consciousness to communicate and understanding of cultural variables and individual identification at national level. Communicators are expected to recognize the context and culture of the counterparts. Skills refer to some basic abilities in the process of communication such as ambiguity tolerance, empathy, self-regulation. It implies the capacity to make appropriate and effective cross-cultural communication. Combination of the three elements can render interactors or communicators effective and smooth in cross-cultural communication.

Chen and Starosta (1996) proposed that intercultural communication competence refers to "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment." A framework of the components of cross-cultural communication competence was further put forward, affective process, cognitive process and behavioral process. Three components serve as equilateral sides of the triangle, being equally important and united.

Hu and Gao (1997, pp.72-82) pointed out that the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication competence can be realized through language teaching. Language teaching aims at cultivating students' social-cultural competence, communicative competence and language competence. Social-cultural communication competence involves language ability and its subclasses, listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation. Communicative competence covers the pragmatic competence of discourse, strategies and sociolinguistics. Their research on cross-cultural communicative competence is conducted in an language teaching perspective, focusing on language communication. As Chen (2013) pointed out that the reinforcement of learners' cross-cultural communicative competence is largely dependent on cross-cultural teaching; in cross-cultural communication competence, knowledge is the basis, consciousness is the core, and competence is the key. All the three can be accomplished through cross-cultural education.

2. PROBLEMS CONFRONTED WITH IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING IN CHINA

In China, college English teaching has also been restricted to the practice and improvement of students' four basic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. A large number of English teachers' primary concern is usually accorded to ensure that students can pass college English test 4 and 6, even post-graduate entrance exam, so they generally attach importance to analysis of language points and sentence patterns, ignoring instruction of cultural content, letting alone motivate students to probe into the inner cultural structure reflected in those cultural phenomena. Without recognition of essential culture of the target language, students feel so hard to understand cultural differences and establish their own cultural consciousness, which usually gives rise to failure in making cross-cultural communication. Even some teachers realize the importance of cultural content; they also avoid discussing too much cultural issues with students due to their insufficient accumulation and command of cultural essence. Some teachers regard cultural exploration as cultural introduction by which culture is regarded as knowledge to introduce rather than a process for students to decode the inner code of cultural phenomena. Students usually forget those sporadic fragments a few days later. So many pragmatic failures come into being. For example, when they come across foreign friends, such improper and impolite questions are even asked as "where are you going? Have you eaten your breakfast?" when they say good bye to their friends, some even say please walk slowly. Such way of receiving cultural knowledge passively is obstructive to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communicative competence. Finally, some students have a superficial understanding about our own native culture or suffer from inner deficiency of their inner culture. When communicating with foreigners about their own native culture, they usually digress from the topic of discussion. Such cross-cultural communication ends up meaninglessly.

3. THE MAIN REASONS CONTRIBUTING TO FAILURE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Problems are caused by teachers. A large number of college English teachers pay much attention to the appropriate and correct form of English language form, neglecting the contrast and exploration about the differences between our native culture and target language culture. Language has been regarded as symbols to be educated and their goal is to improve students' language competence. Because some English

teachers also have little access to make cross-cultural communication, they are of weak cultural sensitivity. Even some of them are conscious of it, they often have a superficial understanding of the target culture. When a cultural difference is involved, they may dismiss it with a few cursory lines, oversimplifying or overgeneralization. Some of them are conscious of the necessity of conducting cross-cultural communication education, they don't want to pose an extra burden to their daily practice, or they are not clear the exact way to make cross-cultural communication education. Therefore, students have little access to real understanding and recognition of cultural differences, let alone cross-cultural communication.

What's more, too many English teachers misunderstand cross-culture communication education as cultural introduction. They usually introduce some cultural phenomena before analyzing passage in each unit. Culture has been regarded as rote knowledge to be conveyed to students, and it is attached to the education of knowledge. Besides, pragmatic skills and communicative rules are not instructed to students. Students are not given opportunities to deal with cross-cultural communication, and they lack explorative learning method for multi-culture.

Problems caused by students. Chinese are deeply influenced by exam-oriented education. Even after students pass the college entrance exam, their main goal of learning college English is to pass college English test 4 and 6, with little attention accorded to the improvement of oral English. Words and grammar, in their mind, constitute the main body of English learning. In English classroom, teachers dominate classroom, students passively receiving knowledge and information from teacher. Seldom do they have chance to speak aloud, not to mention communicating with others and expressing their ideas. Gradually, they are afraid to speak aloud and lack desire to communicate with foreigners. What's more, a great number of students just have a superficial understanding of the culture origin and characteristics of our traditional culture. When communicating with foreigners, sometimes they may suffer from aphasia of Chinese culture.

Problem caused by textbooks. Teachers in China usually adopt comprehensive English books as College English textbooks. Culture is not organically integrated with language content in those textbooks. Those textbooks mainly focus on reading, covering little content on cross-cultural communication. Chen (2013) stated that the organization of culture content in textbooks is unsystematic, and materials on American and British spiritual aspect are rare, such as their value, thinking model, national psychology, moral principles. Students cannot have access to those cultural differences, so they cannot make cross-cultural communication.

4. STRATEGIES TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS' CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

4.1 To Improve Students' Oral English Proficiency

The whole world is compared to a global village, interaction and communication among those villagers is increasingly booming. English as a kind of international language plays a significant role. The primary and ultimate purpose for students to learn English is to enable them to understand some materials in English version and communicates with others. Therefore, promoting students' oral English proficiency serves as the most indispensable part in English teaching. Task-based approach in oral English practice can be adopted for students to practice their oral English, which can engage students in more meaningful activities close to the real situation. When assigned with tasks, students should be well educated about details they should notice, such as time limitation, speaking off sheet. With sufficient time to practice and prepare, students appear more confident. If possible, teachers can participate in their preparation, providing some suggestions. After the performance, error correction and other details such as the volume of their voice, the use of body language might be corrected both by teachers and peers. After the performance, teachers can encourage students to read more related information from the Internet, books and magazines so as to increase their language input at the same time supplement their understanding toward certain aspects of culture.

4.2 To Build Up Correct Education Idea

As mentioned above, most students usually passively receive language form and information in English classroom, which is obstructive to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication competence. Therefore, the primary priority for teachers to accord is to build up the correct education idea. The purpose for students to learn English is not to pass various kinds of exams but to understand input and make output with foreigners. Understanding of proper pragmatic regulations and communicative rules matters a lot. Teachers should serve as facilitators and guides rather than knowledgeable instructors in the process of students learning. When it comes to the introduction of culture, teachers should not read word by word according to books and require students to do rote learning. Instead, the teaching methodology of students-centered should be adopted. Students should be given more opportunities for them to experience the cultural differences by means of Internet and multimedia so that they can internalize. Before class, the theme of the next unit is specified by the teacher so as to render groups of students prepared with PPT in

which relative cultural phenomena and its sense of value are introduced and explored. Corresponding movie and video materials are usually recommended as supporting arguments. In class, they are encouraged to make some performance such as role-play, speech, and debate to present the culture and cultural differences reflected in the unit. After the presentation is made, students are required to make self-assessment and peer assessment within groups. Then teacher creates some circumstances, such as posing some key questions related to the topic or presenting students with a movie typically reflecting the target culture, for students to reflect similarities and differences of their native culture and the foreign culture and make further discussion. Such way of creation of circumstances can provide students with opportunities to simulate the way of cross-cultural communication. After class, they are assigned to the task to do more extensive reading, report writing, movie dubbing, the theme of which should be related to that of the culture learned in the unit. For example, they are recommended to collect material by means of the Internet to broaden their horizons and scope of knowledge. More English platform should be established such as English broadcast, English corner, and English salon so as to engage students in English learning, which means creating more opportunities for students to learn English in order to cultivate their autonomous learning habit. What's more, materials such as supporting arguments should not be faked but real ones, and those arguments should be very representative.

4.3 To Improve Teachers' Cultural Competence

College English teachers themselves should attach importance to the improvement of their cross-cultural communication competence and reinforcement of their cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Culture involves a dynamic developmental process. The sense of value, social norms and way of life in the whole world is experiencing rapid development. Teachers are expected to advance with the times, and they should learn to make use of new media such as video, microblog, blog to help students to get new materials. What's more, teachers should grasp opportunity to study abroad, experiencing exotic culture. When it comes to English language, importance should also be paid to the cultivation of students' pragmatic ability when analyzing new words and sentence patterns, and when teachers prepare for the class, they should grasp the key point in each unit, learn them by heart, analyze them to students so as to enable students to have a better understanding of those knowledge and to memorize, reinforce, reflect, construct and internalize them.

4.4 To Cultivate Students' Ability to Understand Culture and Avoid the Formation of Cultural Bias and Stereotypes

Language, reflecting culture of each country, is also formed based on culture of that country. When making

cross-cultural communication by language, students should recognize that all cultures are equal. There is no superiority and inferiority among those cultures. Therefore, they are expected to learn to respect others, which can facilitate their communication. But we should be well conscious that safe topics such as weather, situation of a city might facilitate our communication while topics related to privacy such as age, marriage, income, health problem may impede communication. At the same time, we should avoid the formation of cultural bias without full exploration and research of a culture. Sometimes the bias we form is based on knowledge and information we received from movies, series, magazines, and Internet, which only reflect part of cultural phenomena of that country, and sometimes it is exaggerating to achieve some effect. Therefore, students are more likely to form cultural stereotypes or bias. Having a better understanding and accept a kind of culture can contribute to the smooth conduction of cross-intercultural communication competence. Cultural empathy can help students overcome those stereotypes. In cross-cultural communication, communicators should take the initiative to shift their own stands, transcend their own cultural framework, abandon their cultural stereotypes, experience and understand the target culture without previously-judged conception, cultural bias or stereotypes. Students should be educated that cultural differences do exist, and the first step is to recognize the differences and then to make a comparison and contrast about their own culture and target so as to have a sufficient recognition of the target culture, finally to communicate with others by standing in the others' shoes. If to do so, others may feel there are no cultural obstacles among them, and a sound relationship may be established. Communication may go much more smoothly.

CONCLUSION

In 21st first century, so many countries in the so-called global village have accelerated their interaction and cooperation in various fields. Communicators are expected to be of great amount of cross-cultural communication competence so as to make effective communication. English college teachers should fully recognize this trend and abandon their traditional way of teaching, regarding students as passive knowledge receivers and imparting them with so much rote knowledge such as a large number of new words for them to recite without engaging students in classroom activities actively. Moreover, teachers also should abandon the

conception that improving students' English proficiency students to pass exams, to speak a few sentences as the goal in English teaching. Teachers should realize that the ultimate purpose for students to learn English is to receive global information as input and communicate with others as output. Therefore, having an understanding of foreign cultures especially cultures in English-speaking countries serves as an indispensable part of contributing to cross-cultural communication. Teachers should engage students in exploring people in English-speaking countries on their way to speak, sense of the value, thinking mode, religious belief, social convention, and even differences in law regulations. More oral activities close to the real situation should be designed for students to look for information from the Internet, magazines, and books so that they can have a further understanding about cultures in English-speaking countries at the same time practice their oral English. Besides, to improve teachers' quality in culture accumulation is also a must. In daily learning, students are encouraged to read extensively, avoid the formation of cultural bias or stereotypes. However, the strategies to cultivate students' cross-cultural communication competence need to be studied further. Empirical study or action research can be conducted to testify its effectiveness.

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